

GAMES

Keeping a Genre Alive

In a Bid to Rekindle the Text-Only PC Games of the 1980s, Fans Write New Adventures

By Vauhini Vara

You are at the edge of a clearing with an impressive view of the mountains. A trail splits off toward some standing stones to the southwest, while the main road emerges from the forest to the east and continues westward down the hill, via a series of switchbacks.

So begins “A New Life,” a computer game created by Alexandre Owen Muñiz, a 31-year-old programmer who lives in Tigard, Ore. Unlike today’s hit videogame titles, Mr. Muñiz’s creation doesn’t include splashy graphics or booming sound effects. Instead, “A New Life” consists of nothing more than text on a screen, and a blinking cursor awaiting players’ commands.

Mr. Muñiz is part of a cult group of gamers that are going back to basics. Their craft recalls a time before “Grand Theft Auto” or “Doom,” when computer games were about as visually compelling as a Microsoft Word document. The scene was set with a block of text, and the player advanced the action by typing simple commands like “go west” or “read sign.” In the early days of home computing, such games were a hit: A company called Infocom was one of the leaders of the genre, and sold more than one million copies of its flagship game, “Zork,” before being acquired by Activision Inc. in 1986. In that game, the player’s first move was to type the words, “open mailbox.”

Now, two decades after the heyday of text-based games, people like Mr. Muñiz are trying to keep the genre alive. Fans post their own text-only adventures online for free, and meet in chat rooms dedicated to the craft.

And once a year, they participate in the annual Interactive Fiction Competition. The contest, going on now and in its 11th year, serves as a sort of Super Bowl of the genre.

“Console games are demanding,” says Mike Snyder, a 33-year-old computer programmer in Wichita, Kan., who discovered the hobbyist community in the late 1990s and has since entered several games in the competition. “With text games, you can sit there at the prompt, go make a sandwich, then come back and play more.”

The plots of the games are often as minimalist as the graphics: To win, players must solve a series of puzzles, like finding the key to a castle door. Many are set in dark, gothic worlds with fantastical villains. One entry in this year’s game contest offers an “evil animated tree.”

This year, game designers worked for months—or longer—to finish their games by the competition’s Oct. 1 deadline. Mr. Muñiz, for his part, began writing his game four years ago, but devoted more time to it after he lost his full-time programming job last year. For the past six weeks, users have downloaded the 36 entries, played them and cast their votes. Most of the prizes for the competition are donated by the participants. Up for grabs this year: \$500 in cash, a \$50 gift certificate to Amazon.com, several pre-owned computer games, and other prizes. Voting will be closed at the end of the day Tuesday.

In the old days, a text adventure game was built to take about 20 hours to play, so that customers would feel that they were getting their money’s worth. The rules of the new amateur competition dictate that games must be designed so they can be completed in under two hours. As a result, many writers have dumped the labyrinthine puzzles of the classic games in favor of a more literary approach. Some show off punchy language. Others highlight character development. Still others experiment with style: “Photopia,” the winner of the 1998 contest, leaps back and forth through time and space, and between characters (it can be downloaded [here](#)). “Shade,” an entry in the 2000

competition, is a dark, existential piece set in a one-room apartment (play it online here).

Game creators need some computer savvy to create the new games, but they don't have to be computer geeks. The new games are built using free software tools that take care of much of the programming, allowing authors to focus on the story rather than lines of computer code.

While a goal of the contest is to pay homage to the genre, today's creators don't hesitate to jettison some of the trademarks (and clichés) of the older games. Characters with amnesia and games set in dark dungeons are "stale," says Jason Devlin, a 21-year-old biology and chemistry student in Nanaimo, British Columbia. Mr. Devlin, who came in fourth last year, is a favorite in this year's competition. His entry, "Vespers," follows a monk through a plague-ridden monastery. For research, he searched the Web for descriptions of plague symptoms and read bits of Giovanni Boccaccio's "The Decameron." "My game has a lot of dying," he says. "I want it to be scary."

In another entry this year, "Tough Beans," players take on the role of a young woman who must get through a day of work after discovering her boyfriend is cheating on her. The game's author, Sarah David, 26, is a technical writer for a software company in Annapolis, Md. Ms. David says she takes character development seriously: In "Tough Beans," the player gets points for making bold decisions like breaking a mirror after spotting a lipstick stain on the boyfriend's shirt. ("Sometimes it's good to take out your aggression instead of bottling it up inside," suggests a page of hints that accompanies the game.)

Last year, just 174 people submitted votes in the competition, and no more than a few dozen regularly visit an online chat room for the group. Those involved say their hobby raises plenty of eyebrows. Mr. Devlin says his friends find it "quaint." "They're like, 'You know they make those with pictures now, right?'" he says. Ian Shlasko, 24, another contestant this year, managed to find just one person to test his game: his mother. "She loved it," says Mr. Shlasko, who works as a programmer for a Wall Street firm. "Then again, even if it was horrible, she would have loved it."

So far, the competition remains an amateur affair. Steve Meretzky, one of the best-known game developers at Infocom, says he receives occasional emails from fans, but has not participated in the online community. The creator of popular text-based games like "Planetfall," "Leather Goddesses of Phobos" and "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" now works at a company that designs cellphone games. The 48-year-old says he doesn't have time to write text adventures for fun. "I have to pay the bills," he says.